

# Soiled Protective Gear — Is it putting you at risk?

by Haley Jorgensen, Public Image

**B**iohazards and toxic chemicals plague firefighters more than ever before, according to Assistant Fire Chief Steve Schweigert of the East Schodack Fire Company in East Schodack, N.Y. “Nowadays, we have more contact with dangerous chemicals and diseases like AIDS and Hepatitis. Before, firefighters didn’t think too much about someone else’s blood,” Schweigert says. “Now they do.”

To ensure the safety of its firefighters, East Schodack recently installed a Continental Pro-Series™ washer-extractor in its truck bay. By properly cleaning protective gear, Schweigert maintains his firefighters are at less risk of injury and disease.

## **Dirty Gear is a Health Risk**

Contaminants from a fire can expose firefighters to cancer-causing carcinogens and eventually

weaken the gear meant to protect them. Blood and body fluids can further expose them to deadly diseases. That’s why the Fire and Emergency Manufacturers and Services Association, Inc. recommends washing soiled turnout gear immediately

after exposure to fire or body fluids. “After too much build-up, the gear itself becomes flammable,” says Schweigert. “In the old days, the more dirty you were, the more you worked. Now, cleaner is the way to be.”

A fire company with 40 volunteer firefighters, Schweigert says East Schodack responds to everything from accident and fire, to Emergency Medical Service (EMS) calls. Each call, he says, requires slightly different protective gear. “It’s important that we don’t transmit diseases wearing the same soiled gear on accident calls,” Schweigert says. “Clean gear protects us and the patient.”

But, properly outfitting a firefighter is costly – running from \$800-1,500 for a set of turnout gear. Proper cleaning, Schweigert says, helps extend the life of the gear by removing contaminants that can break down fabric. “We estimate we’ll get three or four more years out of the gear,” says Schweigert.

## **Choosing a Washer To Fit Your Needs**

With the help of Gauch Distributing, a Continental distributor in Albany,

N.Y., the fire company chose a 30-pound Continental Pro-Series high-performance washer-extractor because of its flexible microprocessor control and programmable extract speeds that reach 323-G force. The easy-to-operate control allows firefighters to select extraction speeds

and rinse cycles. At East Schodack, the washer-extractor is programmed to automatically inject the right chemicals at the appropriate water temperature and time. That way, turnout gear, jumpsuits and truck towels are all cleaned automatically and properly.

Sink-washing – the old way the firehouse cleaned gear – simply didn’t work. “It came out dripping wet and not very clean,” Schweigert says. “It took several days to dry.” Now, since the new machine extracts much of the water from the fabric, gear air-dries in a couple hours, he maintains.

## **Dry Gear is Safe Gear**

That’s critical, since there’s only one set of gear per firefighter. The pants, jacket, hood and gloves dry faster – helping to eliminate the risk of steam burns. “When the gear is wet, you can get steam burned,” says Schweigert. “That’s twice as bad as being heat burned because steam burns penetrate deep into the skin.”

There’s not much extra space in the firehouse, so Gauch Distributing installed the machine against the

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Assistant Fire Chief Steve Schweigert of the East Schodack Fire Company installed a Continental 30-pound soft-mount washer extractor—insuring that the department’s gear is getting cleaned properly and protecting his staff of 40 firefighters.

back wall of the truck bay. Part of the appeal of the soft-mount washer-extractor is that it is not necessary to bolt it to an expensive and permanent concrete foundation – saving time and money. The machine fits into small spaces, and, if need be, it can easily be moved to another spot.

Not only are Pro-Series soft mounts easier to install than hard mounts, according to Ben Gauch of Gauch Distributing, they offer more productivity in a smaller machine.

### Soft mount vs. Hard mount

Richmond Fire Department in Honeoye, N.Y., knows first hand the benefits of the Continental's soft-mount design. The fire department recently replaced its old hard-mount washer-extractor with a Continental Pro-Series soft mount. "It was quite an ordeal to install and run the hard mount," says Patrick Quinlan, first

assistant fire chief at Richmond. "It almost ripped out of the floor, so we started looking for a soft mount."

"When gear is wet, you can get steam burned," says Schweigert. "That's twice as bad as being heat burned because steam burns penetrate deep into the skin."

Plus, Quinlan complained his turnout gear took too long to dry after being washed in the firehouse's hard mount. It simply didn't remove enough water from the gear – putting his firefighters at risk for steam burns.

"There was a lot of dirty gear hanging around," says Quinlan of the firehouse before installing the

Continental. Now his staff is required to properly clean their gear—ensuring their safety and the people they serve.

Dirty gear, according to Quinlan and Schweigert, is hazardous gear. By installing Continental Pro-Series washer-extractors, both men say they're helping to ensure the safety of their staff. "We're hoping to extend the life of the gear *and* our firefighters," says Schweigert.

*Continental Girbau, Inc. is a world-renowned provider of commercial and industrial laundry equipment and laundry production systems. Continental's Pro-Series washers featuring new G-Drive technology, are available in 18-, 30-, 55-, 90-, 130-, and 255-pound capacities and are backed by the company's 5/3-Year limited parts warranty. For more information about Continental products, or to locate a distributor in your area, call 800-256-1073 or visit [www.cont-girbau.com](http://www.cont-girbau.com).*



"I just couldn't afford not to install an on-premise washer."

—Fire Chief Bob Carter,  
Hudson Fire Dept., Hudson, Ohio



Safety is Bob Carter's number one concern as head of a department with 34 firefighters. By requiring his staff to launder their turnout gear in a Continental washer-extractor, he is helping to ensure their safety while extending the life of the gear. "A set of quality turnout gear can cost from \$800–\$1,500 so you want to have it cleaned right," says Carter, "but professional laundry services are so costly. I just couldn't afford not to install an on-premise washer." By cleaning the gear promptly and thoroughly in the Continental machine, Carter says the

department will extend the life of the gear by 50 percent — a definite cost savings. Carter is pleased with the performance of the Continental washer and the service they have received. Most of all, he feels good knowing that Hudson's fire-protection gear is finally getting clean!

Continental's Pro-Series™ washers are available in 18- to 255-pound capacities.

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